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I am James T. Hamilton, an associate professor of public policy, economics, and political science at Duke University. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before your committee, since my work on television violence was initially inspired by a congressional debate. During the mid-1990s, Congress considered "report card" legislation that would have developed information on program content and compiled a list of advertisers that supported violent programming. At the time I was studying how companies react to information provision about their pollution records under the Environmental Protection Agency's Toxics Release Inventory program. Thinking about toxics and television violence, I came to view both as situations where the choices of producers do not reflect the full costs to society of their actions. Both situations involve market failures that economists call negative externalities, since the negative impacts on society arising from production are external to the decision making of manufacturers. That insight led me to write a recently published book entitled *Channeling Violence: The Economic Market for Violent Television Programming* (Princeton University Press, 1998). This morning I hope to describe the economics behind television violence and the implications of economic reasoning for policies to address it.

Television violence is at its core a problem of pollution. Programmers and advertisers use violent content to target television's most valuable demographic, viewers age 18-34. The executives who schedule violence to garner ratings and profits do not take into account the full impact on society of their actions. Research shows that television violence does increase levels of aggression, fear, and desensitization among some who consume it. The strongest impacts are on the youngest viewers. Children are not the target of advertisers on most violent programs. But their exposure to violent images can lead to social damages not factored into decisions about

when to air programs and where to draw the line on content.

In writing a book on the market for violent programming, I (understandably) found few people in the entertainment industry willing to agree their products generate cultural pollution. Media officials often deflect criticisms of their programs with a standard set of responses, which I came to view as the "Top 5 Reasons Why TV Violence is Not a Problem."

1. *We use violence on television to tell, not sell, stories.* Television executives link the use of violence to narrative needs. In hearings before Congress, network executives have denied that they use violence to earn ratings. Yet I found in my research on programming strategies that every channel type uses violence to gain viewers:

* During the sweeps periods, the four major broadcast networks were much more likely to air movies that deal with murder, focus on tales of family crime, and feature family crime or murder stories based on real-life incidents. Nearly a third of network movies during sweeps periods dealt with murder. The Fox network, which often aired movies starting at 8 PM, increased its use of violent movies from 42% to 84% during sweeps.

* When ABC aired *Monday Night Football*, the basic cable channel TBS dropped its use of violent movies on Monday nights. The percentage of violent movies declined on this channel from 92% to 65% of the films shown. When football season ended and male viewers were up for grabs, the violent movies returned.

* When *Seinfeld* dominated ratings on Thursday evenings, HBO had a strategy known internally as 'Testosterone Thursday,' in which it programmed low-quality violent films at 9 PM to attract male viewers uninterested in *Seinfeld*.

These strategic uses of violent programs all contradict the frequent claims that violence is not used to attract viewers.

2. *Violence on television is a reflection of violence in society.* Analyzing data across the country on local news content, I found that the percentage of stories devoted to crime and the percentage of lead stories dealing with crime were not related to the crime rate in a city. Rather it was audience interest in crime, reflected by ratings for *Cops* in the market, that predicted the degree

local news directors focused on crime in their newscasts. The stronger the audience interest in reality police show programming, the more likely newscasts in an area were to focus on crime.

3. *Images on television do not influence behavior*. Social science research indicates that violent images are more likely to be imitated if they go unpunished, show little pain or suffering, and involve attractive perpetrators. This describes the types of violence often used on television. (For statistical evidence on the context of violence in television, see the work by the National Television Violence Study researchers in *Television Violence and Public Policy*, James T. Hamilton, editor).

4. *Television is less violent today*. It is true that on primetime network broadcast television, the percentage of programs in violent genres has dropped in the 1990s. In 1984 51% of primetime network series were in violent genres, a figure that declined to 23% in 1993. But violence has simply migrated to basic and premium cable channels. Nearly two thirds of all basic cable movies on at 8 PM on weekdays are violent. Of the top 5 programs viewed each week on premium channels, over half are violent movies.

5. *What about Schindler's List?* Violence is used in high-quality films. Yet these types of movies are only a small percentage of those shown on television. In a sample of 5,000 violent movies on broadcast, basic cable, and premium channels, I found that only 3% were given four stars (the highest rating) by critics.

In opinion surveys about television, the majority of adult respondents indicates that there is too much violence in entertainment programming. Yet there are segments of viewers who enjoy and consume violent shows. Males age 18-34 are the top consumers of violent entertainment fare, followed by females 18-34. These viewers are particularly prized by advertisers, in part because their purchase decisions can be more easily influenced than those of older consumers. As a result, programmers often target these young adults and use violent shows to attract them. These same violent programs may also attract an unintended audience, children 2-11 and teens 12-17. Primetime shows do not get higher ad rates for attracting child viewers, since the products on these programs are aimed at adults. Yet because the programs are on when children are in the

viewing audience (nearly 1 out of 3 children and teens are watching television at 8 PM on weekdays), children see violent shows aimed at adults.

This exposure of children to violent programs generates a pollution problem. Research indicates that some children who consume violent programming are more likely to become aggressive, to feel desensitized to violence, or experience fear upon viewing. While the market for violence works well in delivering a segment of adult viewers what they want, the market fails with respect to shielding children from harmful effects. Neither advertisers nor programmers are led to consider the full costs to society of using violence to attract viewers, since they are not led by the market to internalize in their decision making the negative impacts these programs have on children. The result -- too much violence consumed by too many children.

Broadcasters correctly stress that their business is selling audiences to advertisers, not raising or educating children. When they make programming choices, they focus on the number of viewers, the value of these viewers to advertisers, the cost of programs, and the number of competitors offering different types of fare. There are multiple incentives that favor the provision of violent programming by some channels. Violent shows are cheaper for networks to purchase. Violent programs are twice as likely to be exported, which increases the returns to producers. As the number of viewing options increases, channels serving particular niches continue to grow -- including those that specialize in developing a brand name for violence. The proliferation of channels will involve an increase in the number of violent viewing options and the intensity of violence on some channels.

If violence on television is a pollution problem, what is to be done? In dealing with everyday pollutants such as toxic chemicals released into the air, the government has a wide array of policy tools to reduce the harms created: zoning of noxious facilities; the direct control of the release of chemicals; the use of liability laws to change behavior; and the taxing of polluting activities. In the media realm the First Amendment rightfully restricts the policy options available to deal with television violence. However, I do believe that there are at least three steps which industry, encouraged by government, can take to lower the exposure of children: provide accurate

content information; consider the likely number of children in the audience when scheduling; and take responsibility for the potential harms that arise from some types of programs.

Information Provision

Parents make the ultimate decisions about whether their children will consume violent content. Yet even for the parents most concerned about shielding their children, the costs in terms of time of finding out what programs contain potentially objectionable content, ascertaining when particular programs are on, and monitoring the viewing of their children are extensive. The V-chip and program ratings provided by the television industry offer the potential to reduce the costs to parents of being responsible parents. The V-chip and ratings system will only work, however, if parents believe the system is credible, informative, and effective.

In my research I found that parents do act if provided with program content information. I found that on primetime broadcast network movies, the Nielsen rating for children 2-11 dropped by about 14% on movies that carried a viewer discretion warning. Since these movies were averaging 1.6 million children 2-11 in their audiences, the drop in viewing translated into approximately 220,000 fewer children in the audience for a movie carrying a warning. The warnings had no impact on ratings for teens or adults. But the warnings did change the willingness of some advertisers to sponsor a program. Once a warning was placed on a violent theatrical film shown on network movies, products likely to experience harm to their brand images by being associated with violence were less likely to advertise on the movie. In particular, products consumed by women, by older viewers, and by families with children were less likely to advertise on a movie once it carried a viewer discretion warning. The number of general product ads on a movie also dropped slightly when the warning was placed. Products aimed at men and younger adults were actually more willing to advertise on these movies with warnings, since their consumers report they are less likely to see television violence as a problem. The companies advertising on movies with warnings were those at less risk for brand name damage.

Controversy about content can have a large impact on advertisers. I found that in its first

season, ads on *NYPD Blue* sold at a 45% discount because of the initial unwillingness of advertisers to be associated with the program. Broadcasters are reluctant to provide viewers with content information in part because of the fear that this will generate controversy and change the willingness of advertisers to support a particular program. Cable channels have historically provided much more detailed content descriptors for their programs, in part because they are less dependent on advertiser reactions. During the early implementation of the television rating system, I found evidence that continued concern for advertiser reactions kept the broadcast networks from providing accurate program indicators on more controversial programs. Comparing the ratings provided by the networks with program evaluations from the Parents' Television Council, I found that the networks frequently "underlabeled" programs, such as giving a program found by the parents' viewing group to contain "gratuitous sex, explicit dialogue, violent content, or obscene language" a TV-PG rating rather than a TV-14 rating. The networks were more likely to underlabel the programs with higher ad rates. Among the networks, NBC had the highest ad rates on underlabeled programs.

More recent research by Dale Kunkel and colleagues (*An Assessment of the Television Industry's Use of V-chip Ratings)* indicates that over three fourths of programs with violence did not carry a violence indicator. An obvious first step that industry officials can take to reduce the exposure of children to violent content is to label such content more frequently, though they may be reluctant to do this because of fears of advertiser backlash. The impact of improved labeling will take time to develop, since the current rating system is akin to the provision of software without hardware. As sets with V-chips arrive in the market, parents will be able to use the content rating systems more easily.

Scheduling

A second measure that industry officials could take would be to shift violent programming to times when children are less likely to be in the audience. This would require a substantial change in behavior by some programmers, since the times when children and teens are in the audience are often the same times when viewers 18-34 are in the audience. At 8 PM on weekdays,

for example, nearly one out of three children and teens is watching television. At this time, nearly two thirds of all movies on basic cable are violent. Fox, which broadcast the highest percentage of violent films among the major networks, often began its movies at 8 P.M. Early evening and daytime hours on weekends are also a frequent time period for the programming of syndicated violent shows. Half of the weekly exposures of children 2-11 to syndicated action adventure/crime series occurs on weekends during the day or early evening before 8 PM. If programmers were to shift violent content to hours where viewing by children was less likely to arise, this would reduce the probability that those most susceptible to harm were exposed to violent content.

Responsibility

A final measure that industry officials could adopt is to admit that some programs may be damaging for some children to watch. In debates about television violence, executives often deny the potential for harm to arise from programming. Parents will be more likely to act to shield their children from violent programming if there is a more consistent message about likely dangers. I found that parents who were personally bothered by television violence were much more likely to intervene and switch channels when objectionable content came on while children were viewing. Parent groups, educators, pediatricians, and foundations all have a role in alerting parents to the need to shield children from violent content and providing information on how to use options such as the ratings system and V-chip. Entertainment officials also have a role to play in this education process. The targeting and repetition of messages to change consumer decisions is the economic foundation of television programming. If the industry could add an additional message to the information it conveys, that violent content may be harmful and parents should shield their children from it, there may be a high pay off to society from this type of advertising.